

## THE COMMON FOLK OF SHAKESPEARE.

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"Shakespeare . . . seems to me," says Walt Whitman, "of astral genius, first class, entirely fit for feudalism. His contributions, especially to the literature of the passions, are immense, forever dear to humanity—and his name is always to be revered in America. But there is much in him ever offensive to democracy. He is not only the tally of feudalism, but I should say Shakespeare is incarnated, uncompromising feudalism in literature."

With such an arraignment of Shakespeare's universality and his sympathy with his fellow men, let us consider the common folk of his plays with a view to discover the poet's actual attitude towards that humbler station in life into which he was himself indisputably born. For our purpose we exclude all personages of rank, all his characters of gentle birth, together with all those, whatever their varying degrees of servitude who wait upon royalty or form in any wise a part or parcel of the households of great folk. This excludes all of Shakespeare's heroes. It will also exclude Shakespeare's fools, from trifling Launce and the delectable Feste to the sad-eyed companion in folly of King Lear. And even Falstaff, who was sometime page to Sir Thomas Mowbray and a gentleman, however unlanded, must stand in his dignity without our bounds.

There remain for us, in our middle domain, some three or four score personages who have speaking parts, of a diversity the equal of their betters and inferiors, even although their actual rôles are, for the most part, subordinate. Conveniently to treat so many of the undistinguished, we must group them, a process the more justifiable when we consider that thus we can best ascertain, what are really Shakespeare's prejudices and whether they are of class or individual.

The drama by Shakespeare's day had already evolved, or rather created by iteration, several very definite stock personages. One of these is the pedant or schoolmaster, so well known to Italian comedy; and Holofernes, in "Love's Labour's Lost," with his loquacity, affectation of learning and essential ignorance, is Shakespeare's most certain contribution to the type. As to "the pedant" so nominated in "The Shrew," this personage is taken over bodily from Gascoigne's "Supposes," the translation of an Italian play, and performs no "pedantic" function; while Pinch, in "The Errors," is called in momentarily to exorcise the devil out of half maddened Antipholus of Ephesus. In the Welshman, Sir Hugh Evans of "The Merry Wives of Windsor," we modulate, so to speak, from the schoolmaster to the parson, for Evans apparently performed the functions of both. Evans is no fool, however he may have sung to keep up his courage on one memorable occasion, in breaking voice, ungowned and sword in trembling hand, while he awaited the coming of his terrible adversary, the French Doctor Caius, deceived in the meeting like himself, by a parcel of incorrigible wags.

Shakespeare's curates, parsons and religious folk are many. Of the class of Evans are Sir Nathaniel, in "Love's Labour's Lost" and Sir Oliver Martext in "As You Like It." Sir Nathaniel is zany to the ponderous folly of Holofernes, he who plays the rôle of "Alisander" to the latter's Judas in the immortal "ostentation, or show, or pageant, or antique of the Nine Worthies"; while our joy in Sir Oliver lies more in his delectable cognomen "Martext" than in the very brief scenes in which he is brought in to "despatch" Touchstone and his Audrey into matrimony under the greenwood tree. The Shakespearean friar is a more important personage, from the plotting, necromantic Home and Southwell in the second part of "Henry VI" to Juliet's Friar Lawrence with his minor counterpart of minor function, Friar Francis in "Much Ado," and the Duke, disguised as such, in "Measure for Measure." Whether a matter wholly referable to his sources or not, Shakespeare conceived of the friar of Roman Catholic Verona, Messina or Vienna, in a very different spirit from that in which he represents the small parson, Sir Hugh or Sir Oliver. Friar Francis in "Much Ado" detects the "strange misprision in the two princes" whereby the Lady Hero

is slanderously wronged, and it is his prudent advice, which, followed implicitly by the lady and her friends, rights that wrong in the end. The likeness of this function of Friar Lawrence is patent to the most superficial reader; but unhappily for his prudence and his ingenuity, the accident to his messenger, the precipitancy of Romeo, the influence of the very stars is against him and he fails where his brother friar had succeeded. Nowhere in Shakespeare does the clergy function with more dignity than in "Measure for Measure" whether in the rôle of the chaste and devoted novice, Isabella, or in the grave and searching wisdom of the Duke. What Shakespeare's attitude toward formal religion may have been we have little that is definite to go by. Who can doubt that it was he, however, and none other, who paid for the tolling of the great bell of St. Saviours when his brother's body was laid there to rest? And who can question with all his scenes of religious pomp and dignity that Shakespeare recognized, with Wolsey, that all these forms of earthly vanity are

a burden

Too heavy for a man that hopes for heaven?

We may regret that Shakespeare has nowhere exhibited to us, like Chaucer in his "poure Persoun of a toun," his ideal of the cloth. It has been wittily said that it is a credit to human nature that no critic has as yet called Shakespeare a Puritan. It is somewhat less creditable that some have gone about to show him the satirist of Puritanism, especially in Malvolio. It was Jonson, the moralist, who satirized Puritanism, not Shakespeare, whose business was with qualities that differentiate men in the essentials of their natures and in the conduct which these differences entail.

Let us glance next at the physicians of Shakespeare. In Dr. Caius of "The Merry Wives," albeit he is boastful of his intelligence from the court, the doctor is lost in the gross wit of the Frenchman's ignorance of English satirized. The apothecary who sells Romeo his death potion, in his "tattered weeds," could assuredly not have been of a profession in which there are no beggars. The father of Helena in "All's Well," although he left to his daughter the miraculous cure of the King of France by means of his medical secrets,

is reported a man of dignity, learning and much experience in his practice. The doctor in *Macbeth* has won the praises of his own jealous profession with the professional aptitude of his comments on the somnambulist symptoms of Lady *Macbeth*; while the physician, *Cornelius*, skilled as he is in poisons, honorably deceives the wicked queen of *Cymbeline* with a sleeping potion instead of the deadly drug which it was her purpose to administer to the unhappy *Imogen*.

Unlike his contemporary *Middleton* and some others, *Shakespeare* does not satirize the profession of the law; and the lawyer, as such, scarcely figures in the plays. At opposite poles, in the plays which have to do with *Falstaff*, we have Master *Shallow* "in the county of Gloucester, justice of the peace and 'coram,'" described by *Falstaff* as "a man made after supper of a cheese-paring . . . for all the world like a forked radish, with a head fantastically carved upon it with a knife." And we have likewise the grave and honorable Chief Justice *Gascoigne*, whose courage and impartiality in the exercise of his high functions caused the regenerate Prince to choose him for his guide and counsellor on the assumption of his new royal dignities. As to the lesser functionaries of the law, the watchman, the constable and the beadle, *Shakespeare* exhibits the general free spirit of his time and laughs, as the rest of the world has ever laughed, at the insolence, ineptitude and ignorance of the small man dressed in a little brief authority. It might be argued with some likelihood of success that this is identically the spirit that marks the Sheriff of Nottingham as the butt of the lawless pranks of *Robin Hood*, the attitude towards constituted authority which combined in the free ranging devils of the old miracle plays the functions of policing the crowd and catering to its merriment. Beyond his designation, "a constable," *Dull* in "*Love's Labour's Lost*," scarcely represents for his class more than his name; and as to *Elbow* in "*Measure for Measure*," his "simplicity" like his malapropisms, seems a faint and colorless repetition of these qualities in the immortal *Dogberry*. *Dogberry* is universal, the ubiquitous, inevitable, unescapable man of weight, ponderous alike physically and mentally; for I am persuaded with an old-fashioned American critic, that *Dogberry* was "of ample size—no small man speaks with sedate

gravity. . . . No man of the lean and dwarfish species can assume the tranquil self-consequence of Dogberry. How could a thinly covered soul [exhibit] . . . that calm interior glow, that warm sense, too, of outward security, which so firmly speaks in Dogberry's content and confidence."<sup>1</sup>

Our obvious generalization as to Shakespeare's estimate of the learned professions, then, is this: he found, in all, earnest, honorable and capable men and honored them as such; and he found likewise among them the stupid, the pedantic, the pretentious and the absurd. It was for their follies that he ridiculed them, not because of their class or their station in life.

Of the small gentry of Elizabethan England, Master Ford and Master Page with their two merry wives offer us the best example in comedy. The discordant plans and plots for a provision in life for Mistress Anne Page are in keeping with many a like unconscious parody on the grand alliances of folk of higher station. The foolish Slender, who is likewise a small landed proprietor, is nearer an absolute fool or "natural" than any of Shakespeare's clowns, professional or other, for wit proceeds no more out of him, however he beget wit in others, than it ever comes forth from the mouth of Andrew Aguecheek his cousin-german (so to speak) of Illyria. In Alexander Iden, who meeting with Jack Cade in his Kentish garden, kills him in single fight, we have a serious personage of much Slender's station in life. But Iden has his wits as well as his valor about him and his knighting is his deserved reward. Nearer the soil, if closer to royalty, is the kind-hearted, allegorical minded king's gardener who apprises the queen of Richard II. of the monarch's mischance in falling into the hands of his enemy, victorious Bolingbroke. In the country folk that fill in the background of "As You Like It" and the later acts of "The Winter's Tale," Shakespeare's English spirit comes into contact with the conventional types of Italian pastoral drama. Corin is the typical shepherdess, beloved but not loving, and Sylvius, the pursuing shepherd unbeloved. But as if to correct an impression so artificial, we have, beside them, William and Audrey, English country folk in name and nature like Costard and Jaquenetta, and in Shakespeare's

<sup>1</sup> Henry Giles, "Human Nature in Shakespeare," 1868.



maturer art, far more redolent of the soil. William, like Slender, and many a man of better station, is a mere natural; but his witlessness is as distinguishable from the folly of the Shakespearean "clown," as his boorishness differs from the literal simplicity of the Shepherd who becomes foster brother to Perdita in "The Winter's Tale." Mopsa and Dorcas with their shepherds of the sheep shearing, in these charming comedy scenes, are English country folk; and Autolycus, despite his fine Greek name, is a delightful English rogue and incorrigible vagabond.

And now that we have all but touched the bottom of the Shakespearean social scale, we may note that in Shakespeare poverty does not necessarily make a man vicious; nor does roguery destroy humor in a man or deprive him of his brains. The porter in *Macbeth* is a foul-mouthed drunken lout; the nameless "old man" in the same tragedy is a credulous recorder of marvels. But Adam, the old serving man of Orlando, is faithful almost to death. Dame Quickly of London is a silly old muddlehead, alike innocent of morals and of common sense; and her sister Dame Quickly of Windsor is a shameless go-between and meddler; but the widow, keeper of lodgings for pilgrims in "All's Well," has a virtuous and honorable disposition. The drawer, Francis, in "Henry IV." "sums up his eloquence in the parcel of a reckoning"; but there is no keener, droller fellow in the world than the grave digger in "Hamlet," and it is dubious if for natural parts, however diverted to the "doing" and undoing of his fellows, Autolycus has ever had his equal. Shakespeare's carriers talk of their jades and their packs; his vintners and drawers of their guests and their drinking; his musicians disparage their own skill and have to be coaxed to show it; and his honest botchers, weavers and bricklayers hate learning, and in their rage variously kill a poet and hang a clerk. And curious as all this may appear to him who habitually views the classes below him as merely his servants or the objects of his organized charity, all this—save possibly the homicides—is as true of today as of the age of Shakespeare.

And here perhaps as well as anywhere, we may digress into "the Shakespearean prejudice as to mobs." The mob figures as such conspicuously three times in Shakespeare's plays, in the second part of "King Henry VI.," in "Julius Cæsar," and in "Coriolanus." It

is represented in all three cases as fickle, turbulent, cruel, foul and possessed of a rude sense of humor; and this last is Shakespeare's—perhaps, more accurately, the Elizabethan—contribution to the picture. It has been well observed that Tudor England presented no precise parallel to the persistent struggle of the Roman plebs against the bulwarks of patrician oligarchy. And it is doubtful if Shakespeare would have sought for such parallels had they existed. In unessentials—and the picture of the mob is such to the dramatic action of these two Roman plays—Shakespeare is always faithful to his sources, and Plutarch's crowd is cruel, seditious, and "contemptibly responsive" to the most obvious blandishments of the demagogue. In the admirable scenes of Jack Cade's rebellion, although the material was nearer home, Shakespeare once more followed his sources, here in Holinshed and Halle. Neither of these worthies comprehended in the slightest degree the actual political issues underlying the Kentishmen's revolt, which historically was as respectable as it was fruitless. But Shakespeare was not seeking historical accuracy, but dramatic effectiveness and fidelity to the observed characteristics of ignorant men escaped from the curb of the law. Shakespeare, as to the mob, was no sociologist, and his yearning for the submerged tenth was not that of many a worthy gentleman of our own time who otherwise misrepresents the unshriven objects of his solicitude. In short a mob was to the unlettered dramatist merely a mob. Man running in packs unbridled by authority was a phenomenon better known to unpoliced Elizabethan England than to us, and Shakespeare found most of his own impressions in this matter to tally remarkably with those of Plutarch and Holinshed.

With Shakespeare's mob we leave the country and meet with the small tradesmen of towns; for even the Kentish "rabblement" of Jack Cade is represented, like that of ancient Rome, as made up of small trades people—cobblers, butchers, smiths and the like—not folk of the fields. Individually as collectively, Shakespeare has a greater appreciation for the humors of the tailor, the joiner, and the bellows-mender than for his psychology. The drunken tinker of "The Shrew" the author found in his source and, unlike that source, wearied, he dropped his adventures when the play within the play

was at an end. The hempen homespuns with the illustrious weaver, Bottom, at their head, repeat in their absurd drama of "Pyramus and Thisbe," a situation already sketched in "Love's Labour's Lost," one in which the banter and cruel interruption of ungente gentles evidently reproduces a situation by no means unknown to better actors than Bottom, Flute and Starveling. A kindly spirit speaks in the words of Theseus:

For never anything can be amiss  
When simpleness and duty tender it;

for truly is he tolerant who can find words of praise for the good intentions of the amateur actor, a being little loved of god or man. To the professional player, whom he knew better than any other man of art, Shakespeare is courteous and appreciative in the person of Hamlet, and we know from an often quoted sonnet, how deeply he could feel the degradation which popular contemporary opinion attached to the player's art.

The merchant, in Shakespeare's day, was a far more dignified person than the mere man of trade. A merchant, it is true, waits with a jeweller, but also with a painter and a poet, in the anteroom of silly, sumptuous Timon. But ordinarily, the merchant is a more dignified person, extending courtesy to strangers, as in "The Comedy of Errors," taking risks for his merchandise and for himself, as in the case of old Ægeon, in the same play, who has ventured on markets forbidden and is imprisoned for his daring. The most notable Shakespearean merchant is, of course, Antonio, the merchant prince of Venice, an adventurer in the Elizabethan sense into strange markets and a gambler for high commercial stakes. His gravity—or presaging melancholy—befits his dignity, and his generosity to Bassanio, a fellow adventurer (but in more than the Elizabethan sense), is only equalled by his authority among his fellow merchants and his scorn of the unrighteous Jew. Shylock, too, is of the merchant class, but a pariah alike for his race and his practice of usury. But Shylock will take us into precincts irrelevant; for the Jew, whatever your thought of him or mine, is not of the common folk even of Shakespeare.



Next to the merchants come Shakespeare's seamen, the noble-minded Antonio of "Twelfth Night," Sebastian's friend, the outspoken sea-captain, boatswain and mariners of "The Tempest," the attendant sailors and fisher folk of "Pericles." Shakespeare was a landman; save for an occasional line, his descriptions of the sea, in the richest of all literatures in this respect, are none of them important. The mariner as such he treats with the respect due a person only partially known. With the soldier, in a martial age, Shakespeare was better acquainted and he knew him from the kings and great commanders of the historical plays to such pasteboard and plaster military men as Parolles, Nym and Pistol. Of Falstaff's levy and his rabble attendants, from Bardolph of the carbuncled nose to the minute page, it may be said that they cut a sorrier figure in France than at the Boarshead in Eastcheap. But Shakespeare's army levied better men than these; the heroic gunners on the walls of Orleans, the brave and capable captains of four kingdoms, Gower, Fluellen, MacMorris, and Jamey in "Henry V.," and the manly English soldiers Bates, Court and Williams. If the refined, modern critic, versed in the psychological researches of an incessantly prying world, would learn whether the old dramatist, Shakespeare, had any notions as to the mental processes and moral stability of the common man, let him read and ponder the simple incident of King Henry V. incognito, and the soldier Williams and their arguments pro and con as to the responsibility of princes. Williams is the type of the honest, fearless, clear-headed "man in the street" who honors his king, not slavishly because he is a king, but for the qualities that make him kingly, who respects manhood (his own included) above rank and is the more valiant that he knows the cost of valor. There are several well-known tales of military devotion—they are not English—of the soldier, wounded unto death in a quarrel, the righteousness or wrong of which he cares not even to inquire, who dies blessed and content that he has obeyed in unquestioning faith, the august commands of his master. Williams is not of this type. His free soul will challenge his gage in the eye of his prince and when his heart tells him he is right, let the devil forbid. Shakespeare, too, knew the common man, who is bleeding today for England; and his trust, like ours, was in him. Nor did our wise old dramatist,

for all his scenes of the pomp and circumstance of war, forget its terror, its sorrow and its pathos. In the third part of "Henry VI.," that unhappy king is seated alone on the field of battle as the struggle surges away from him. And there enters "a son that hath killed his father dragging in the dead body," and later "a father bearing his dead son." Poignant are the words of these common men in their common woe, the battle woe of all ages and all times in the grip of which the least are as the great and the greatest as the poorest.

In the taverns, the brothels and the jails, Shakespeare found the foulmouthed, the ignorant and the dishonest and he represented them in all these particulars in a faithful, if at times, forbidding, reality to life. Moreover, his prejudice against evil is pronounced in the very repulsiveness of such scenes. He knows that there are impostors among beggars, that trial by combat is only a somewhat cruder method of getting at the truth than trial by jury, that there are corrupt and incompetent magistrates and fools abounding in all walks of life. Moreover, he depicts in his plays a feudal state of society, for such was English society in his day. But there is nothing in these honest dramatic pictures of English life, from the king on his throne to Abhorson with his headsman's axe, to declare Shakespeare prejudiced against any class of his fellow countrymen. Wherefore, our obvious generalization as to Shakespeare's attitude toward common folk, whether they be learned or unlearned, is this: he found among them the stupid, the ignorant, the pretentious and the absurd; but he found likewise in each class the earnest, the honorable and capable, and honored each after his kind as such. For their follies he ridiculed them; for their virtues which he recognized, he loved them, deflecting neither to ridicule nor respect because of station in life.